Interview with Alice Pickering

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project
Foreign Service Spouse Series

ALICE PICKERING

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

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Q: This is Jewell Fenzi interviewing Alice Pickering on May 19, 1992, at my home in Washington, DC. This is our second interview.

In order to accept a plane ticket, to go along with your husband when he was speaking, and it wasn't a USG ticket, the organization provided it, you are now expected to put that on your tax return as “income.”

PICKERING: Yes; as a gift.

Q: And yet you are a “private individual” with no obligations.

PICKERING: I assume they could say that the only reason I was invited was because I am the wife of the representative who had been asked to speak. But as far as I know my husband is not mandated to show it as personal income as a gift when he's been invited to speak officially by, e.g., the World Affairs Council or a group of that nature, which is not a private organization but a public spirit organization involved with international affairs. I don't know the precise regulation but these are all issues that have to be approved individually by the legal officer in the Secretary of State's office; that's where this ruling about this travel issue came down.

Q: I would contest it on the grounds that if I have to claim it, my husband. I mean, what's the difference?

PICKERING: That's a little dangerous, because then they may decid(she laughs) they might have to do the same thing; I'm not sure.

Q: I think he's doing them a service by going and speaking to them. Maybe that's a distinction.

PICKERING: Yes, of course. He's contributing his time and experience as a government employee to speak on an issue of public concern, which I understand, and he does that very frequently. However, I feel that there are increasing restrictions on spouses, wives or husbandof dependents by the Department of State that seem to imply that we also are considered in an official capacity. At the same time, in every other situation that is an asset to the government we're distinctly considered as not employees.

I find the whole issue of giving us diplomatic passports something that could be considered putting dependents in an official capacity for travel and for their own protection as dependents in an overseas situation. I think there are many issues that could be explored legally concerning dependents and their status.

Q: Absolutely.

PICKERING: It would be a very good project, I think, for one of the groups that are involved in dependents' issues to explore further, because I think many of these things are simply decided on a basis of an individual person reading a regulation in a way perhaps that the Secretary wishes it to be [read] or that management wishes, that are not perhaps necessarily interpreted that way in every case.

Q: Before we started recording you asked what AAFSW is up to these days. Well, AAFSW has finally endorsed spouse compensation, and Cristie Shurtleff, who is one of the officers

has put forth a proposal to hire spouses on a contract basis to do the traditional work of diplomacy. She presented that to the FLO office recently and was turned down absolutely flat.

PICKERING: By whom? On what basis?

Q: By Maryann Minutillo? I'm not sure, I don't know all the details because I haven't talked to her about it, Shurtleff was not at our last meeting. So our group, the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History, is considering forming an ad hoc group to reform the '72 Directive. The basis for our changing the Directive would be Kristie's proposal. Donna Hartman, who's here in Washington, has agreed to work with us, and we were going to take it right to Larry Eagleburger in the fall. Some of these things that you've just told us that the Department is working the spouse issue both ways when it benefits them. We're untouchables, we're private individuals, but when it also advances them to have us be in an official capacity, then we suddenly assume those colors.It seems to me you've had an awful lot of that.

PICKERING: And I do believe something you said, Jewell, about FLO and I've been concerned about it for a long time. I'm not saying CLO, because they're overseas, they're working in their community and doing only what they're mandated to do by the FLO office. But the FLO organization has increasingly turned, and I've talked to many of the members, some of them are my friends, to the situation of working wives or finding opportunities for women to continue their careers or work in embassies or expand the work agreements.

All of which is very fine, but they seem to have absolutely taken no responsibility or concern for the dependent wives who are fulfilling or who wish to fulfill the representational function and all the other things we've been talking about. I wrote a paper a long time ago, which I'm sorry I've packed it up now, not thinking it would be needed just now, I'll find it, giving what I outlined as the important areas in which the senior wife participated.

When the first effort began under Sue Low and that group to obtain compensation for spouses, and they asked for our input, I gave three areas; and under each area I gave some details on things that I had always participated in. One of course I considered was management. And management concerned not just the representational function in terms of ordering food, preparing the parties, planning the parties.I included things such as staff organization, which would include personnel issues, because any senior wife who has a staff must deal with issues like salary, of wage compensation, of leave; of contracts for those employees, which I consider a very real management issue.

I considered inventory control, which the ambassador or other senior officials are responsible for but I think it normally tends to be whoever is managing the household to be responsible for furniture, silver, anything in the household; participating in ordering those materials. I consider that a very real participation for the government in almost a General Services or inventory sense. And on and on in the management field. I think most senior wives develop good managerial skills.

Secondly, I included the cultural relationships that usually can be developed in a country through women's organizations, through the senior wife's participation in areas that normally the mission's officers are not particularly involved; simply time issues. And I added a lot of things under that heading that senior wives can professionally contribute to the role of the mission in any country.

Q: Please send us the paper.

PICKERING: I really wrote a long paper, because I was trying to bring out every professional avenue that a senior wife can develop and therefore participate in the mission's function.

Q: This [paper] could be very valuable to Kristie's proposal.

PICKERING: I know. That's exactly what could be used for that. (I may not have my materials available before fall.) Let me rethink. There were three areas: Management, Cultural Affairs, and of course Contacts. That wasn't how I titled it, in the context of the role one has in meeting senior officials in any country, meeting the wives and families of senior officials, participating in any sense with visitors that was the third big area, now I remember. Not only receiving official American government officials but also receiving other officials, particularly Americans who come in any capacity university figures, people in the arts, in business, and I think it is definitely in the role of U.S. missions to be the facilitators between visiting groups and the people of the country. As to the wife, along with other officials in the country, to develop skills as far as what is available in the country, what are the resources, that you can become a facilitator for visiting Americans. To establish bilateral relationships beyond the official government-to-government relationships I always thought was a very positive role for spouses, and particularly for senior spouses, to play, because they're often just in the situation by nature of where they are. This can be a very productive role that a spouse can play within the mission if she approaches it professionally and learns about the country in which she's living and then is able to interpret it for the visitors in our own areas.

Those were the three areas that I identified. Many people could add many more things.

Q: I think those are probably primarily cursory areas, too.

PICKERING: And I'm sure that could be developed into a very ...

Q:The administrative part.

PICKERING: Oh, the management part is becoming increasingly important in terms of financial accountability as well for all the representational functions.

Q: I thought that the one area where there was a legal possibility is one of discrimination, because now, say you went to a post where your predecessor has been a bachelor. You

can keep on that $22,000 a year housekeeper but you cannot let her go and take her salary yourself for doing the job. That is discrimination, and if there is no housekeeper there and you don't want to do the job but you do it for your spouse, you cannot be paid to do it. That is out-and-out discrimination against sex, the dependent spouse. I thin(she laughs) there's a lawsuit there, a class action.

PICKERING: And I would also suggest to the group that they explore what I've done in several places for various reasons: What is being done in other foreign offices? For example, I know the Canadians in the early 1980s had a Royal commission appointed to deal with the specific subject of the spouses of the Foreign Office in Canada. And they came up with a very good program very similar to the one we're discussing, in which if the wife agreed and wished to participate, there would be a contract of some kind in which she would have identifiable functions for which she could be paid and she would be responsible to the Foreign Office for fulfilling those functions.

It sounded very good and was very well received by the Foreign Office wives. However, it was never implemented by their parliament because of course it would cost money. But I think it would be worthwhile for the group that is proposing these changes in our own situation to certainly explore the Canadian proposal, because there might be some very good material in it that would support what we wanted to do. And also [explore] the Scandinavians or any of the countries that have developed a more advanced role for the spouses in terms of compensation. That might be supportive of our proposals, so the Administration wouldn't perceive that we were alone in this, that certainly it's a problem worldwide increasingly for wives; and their proposals might contain a lot of good material that could be useful to support our position.

I know that in particular the Canadians' sounded very close to what our proposal seems to be and might be the best one to look into. I know it was derailed only because of money, not because it wasn't approved by either their Foreign Office — I think they approved it —

and the wives' group approved it. It just simply came down to the problem of the finances to pay for it.

Q: Since we're talking about cutting down the Defense budget to help decrease the deficit, isn't it possible to effect something like spouse compensation with funds already in the Department without having to go to Congress and have them legislate it? Can't funds be shifted? Can't we cut back somewhere?

PICKERING: I believe so. However, I think the Department of State, as usual because of opening all these new posts, is severely cutting budgets worldwide. And of course that would be the problem. I think it's always the problem. There are possibilities, I don't think there's any reason why funds couldn't be changed; they give contracts for many things in overseas situations in order to get things done. But I think money is always tight, and it's very difficult to give it to spouses.

Q: Recently, $250,000 was given to FLO to enhance spouse employment initiatives. And they're talking of spending it on videos and written material. We don't need that: we needed that 20 years ago, in 1972 when suddenly there was this schism and spouses were free and spouses were being caught up in the women's movement and were looking for employment. People know how to go about looking for a job nowadays, they don't have to be told how to fill out a Form 171 and how to do informational interviews.

PICKERING: Well, I thought most of that was already available through the CLO and do you understand why the FLO seems to be so negative toward spouse compensation?

Q: Yes. Because you have people now who've been in FLO for any number of years, they've become part of the bureaucracy. They have to work with Management, so their interest is in protecting their turf, protecting their position with the men and officers that they have to work with in the Department. Lesley Dorman in 1978, when FLO was born, advocated that it be physically outside the Department, because she insisted that that was what would happen. At first we were supposed to have spouses like Janet Woolley, who

came in primarily as a spouse although she had had some counseling education, and it was supposed to be a rotating thing. Well, it doesn't get rotated very often. They get a tremendous salary, $80,000 or something like that. Heavens! you could cut those salaries in half and people would still be crying for them. And you could rotate the job of Director of OBC it's such a high-ranking Civil Service job.

PICKERING: Which, again, started out as a very dedicated spouse who developed it and started it and

Q: Yes. No spouse who has been in the field could ever hope to.

PICKERING: Because they won't take somebody for just two years.

Q: Right. But she could never get to this elevated GS rating and be a trailing spouse and go from post to post.

PICKERING:I would like to mention something else, if you're putting all this down to explore, because I don't know if this is accurate or not. When we went to Tel Aviv in '85 and on, so it's very recent, when the CLO position became open the second year or so that I was there, our DCM's wife wanted to apply for that job. She was told she could not, that it's a general rule because, of course, her husband as a DCM would have to supervise and report. If that is still true, I think that is definitely discrimination. I can understand why the ambassador's wife, [sic] in terms of just mission feeling, would not want the ambassador's wife to do it even though she might be better qualified than anybody. But I think it is very unfair to out-rule the DCM's wife. I think the CLO could be supervised by the Administrative counselor. And I don't see any real conflict of interest for a CLO as a DCM's wife and I think that's a case, again, of really discrimination against a senior wife.

I was told that it was pretty much across the board that I think these are the psychological problems that senior wives face, and I mention it in my tape. It's not just that our own Department and, say, now that FLO is not being positive or trying to assist the senior wife

in her role in any way. But we also have a psychological problem within the mission which is very real and hard to overcome, but that I think should be addressed where people feel that jobs are given and it's nepotism. The higher and more senior the wife, not only is the government holding that you're not an employee but you have people, and junior people, feeling that if you do get anything that they perceive as a perk or a job, even if you're the best qualified person and I'd say that would certainly have to be the case there's a great deal of resentment toward a senior wife. So I think we're facing all kinds of problems on all levels, and I think it's no wonder that the senior wife is feeling besieged, threatened, and very discouraged and disillusioned right now.

Q: There's an aspect of the Associates' proposal that disturbs me greatly and apparently some of this, I think, $350,000 can be used for a spouse who writes her own proposal to do work in her field at post. Alice, I can think of nothing that would be more demoralizing than to have the DCM's wife, if she were to get a stipend like that, to go out and do something in her career field where you had 15 women under her who were doing the ordinary jobs in the embassy which have gotten better now than telephone operators and visa file clerks, in some posts. What is that going to do to morale if you have these women working in underemployment jobs in the mission which is all they can get, and the DCM's wife has a nice stipend from the FLO office because she's written a nice FSA proposal to go out and work in her field as a volunteer in the local community but be paid through this FSA stipend? It just absolutely blows my mind that no one could see what a demoralizing effect that would have. The only person who would benefit from that would be the person who got the stipend and the proposal.

PICKERING: I've always felt that was the part of the Associates' program that was not addressing some real problems. I feel that anybody who has some expertise in her own field could probably go ahead and pursue that in some way in a country; and if it was not addressing the issues that we're talking about.

I go back to another thing that I talked about in my history tape: I feel, because of this lack of concern from top to bottom in the Department here in Washington, what we're also not doing is giving young officers and their wives or spouses whenever they come into the Service a clear understanding in their orientation and briefing.

Q:(laughing) Of why they're here.

PICKERING:Of what this whole role of representation means within the context of the mission, representation's function in the mission. I find that most junior people [think] that it is simply fun and games. No one's ever sort of brought it to their attention, put it in any kind of context. Evehalf an hour of the A-100 course, which wouldn't be much, to explain how this fits in and should fit into the mission. Otherwise, why do we get so much money to do it on the senior levels? And because it's on a senior level, I think the junior officers think, well, it has nothing to do with them. And you start right at the beginning with a misunderstanding and an ignorance of what this is all about, from the time they enter the Service and then go off to their first post that I think 30 years ago was not true.

We certainly were given much more of an understanding, there was certainly a wives' course that at least gave some glimpse of what you might be expected to do, but in a positive sense as being part of the mission, not as something far out having nothing to do with the political or the economic officer. And we've seen what happens is then that young officer comes to something at the ambassador's house where you're inviting important people, key people, for a very specific reason, and the junior officer thinks it has nothing to do with politics or economics or commercial affairs. They're much less prepared and ignorant about this function than ever before, and that leads to a lot of this misunderstanding within the mission of the role of the senior wife or of the ambassador himself.

Q: It puts a greater burden on you.

PICKERING: And I think the Department is failing to put that into the counseling, the orientation, from the beginning. Don't wait until you're a senior wife and the responsibility falls on you and you realize you're not having any support or help.

Q: I read somewhere recently that very good, dedicated, career senior wives after the 1972 Directive were afraid to share their knowledge with some young upcoming officers and that a lot was lost. Do you think that's really the case?

PICKERING: Well, I certainly know that when I went out in '74, which was just shortly after the '72 Directive and it began to take effect, I was told very clearly in the briefing I had because in those days they didn't have an ambassador's course or anything but I did go over for a morning to the Overseas Briefing Center and they brought in various people who explained some things. I remember that memorandum was shown to me and I was told "you must not, you cannot ask any dependents." I as a non-employee of course shouldn't have anyway. But this was in terms of any of the functions he would be doing at our house or I would be involved in. That we could not in any way ask anybody to do anything unless they volunteered.

So, I went out with that in my mind and I certainly was very wary about that. And I also found that at that particular time, even to ask people to do volunteer work not at my house but, say, the American Women's Club, you would try to get people interested because the morale issue is also involved there.

Q: I think that would be my forte.

PICKERING: Yes, responsibility for morale. But I found that at that point, people were so sensitive that even if you asked a junior wife or anybody junior to you whether your husband was DCM or consul general or whatever, a lot of young women interpreted that as a threat, that you even asked them to "volunteer," although I was told you could ask people to do things on a voluntary basis. But a lot of young women at that time would even

resent the question and felt that that was pressuring them. Which I didn't think was true if they said no, I would never have considered that in any way a threat for me in any form.

So there was, I think, a very difficult transition period. I think now if a senior wife would ask somebody to volunteer to do something, the person would consider it yes or no, they could or could not, and wouldn't consider it a threat or that to say no would be difficult. I think that's gone back but I certainly even up to now am very careful what people might interpret as a request from you to do anything.

Q: When you invite a couple from the embassy to a function, do you invite the wife with the understanding that she is to work? If she wants to come, she participates? If she doesn't want to participate, don't come? Do you do that?

PICKERING: Well, I think I mentioned that in El Salvador in the early 80s we found things to be so difficult that in terms of the protocol issues my husband issue(laughing) we wrote a protocol memorandum for our embassy. We had an enormous number of high-level guests, we had very high-pressure things going on there, and this memorandum made it very clear that when people from our mission were invited to our house for representational events, these were some of the considerations.

This was addressed to the officers of the mission. We made a very clear statement in the first statement that this did not apply to non-employee dependents of the officers but if they wished to participate in any of these events, we expected the following rules to apply, i.e., if you're invited for an event please come 15 minutes beforehand so that you will be able to find out who's coming and so on; you are expected to stay until the end of the time frame of the event; you would be expected to speak with the visitors both American and non-American rather tha(she laughs) to spend your time with other personnel of the mission. All things that we thought were absolutely basically ingrained in every Foreign Service officer.

But we were finding at that time it was never part of any training. Most of the young FSO's said, “Gee, nobody ever told us this.” They weren't told that they should come a little early, that they were expected to stay through the whole time frame of the party, that they were expected to be there to assist either in introducing people or accompanying people to the door, various things that would need to be done at an official function. Many of them said that they were very grateful but they simply didn't know that these were the normal protocol roles/rules for an official event. And most of them were quite responsive.

However, there was one wife, her husband was our public affairs officer, who just never came, just wouldn't come. Which was fine with us, there was no reason she should, but it was far better than a group of dependents coming and not spending their time being useful. For instance, answering invitations: people simply didn't. This may be part of our society now; we were brought up 30 years ago in a different frame and we were taught these things at home. Maybe this isn't happening now.Even in New York, officers who were sent invitations “RSVP or regrets only” often simply wouldn't reply, and our protocol officer in the embassy it's bad enough having to do it with your foreign guests, but then to also have to go through half of your mission to find out if they and/or wife or without wife were coming because certainly in New York we were paying caterers by the person. It was very important to us if half of the dependent wives weren't planning to come, because at some point we would have to say how many people we were expecting and we would have to plan for that. I always insisted, if the invitation was in my name as well as my husband's, so it was not a stag affair, that we invite the dependent wife.I never felt that if it were in my name we should only ask the embassy officers. I always felt this offered an opportunity for the dependent wives to be there; I felt if they wanted to be involved those are the times they should be involved. So we always did invite them, and often many of them could not come because of children and babysitting, which was fine, but we simply had to know a count, and I think even overseas this is important when you're planning a major event. And a lot of people simply never answered the invitation. These things seem so basic to me, and yet that's what we had to do in El Salvador. The first item was “please

respond to any invitation by the ambassador, the DCM, or any other official in the U.S. mission." I was quite appalled that these young people seemed to have never been told that in the framework of their jobs in the Department. This is when I went back to some kind of half an hour in their A100 course that it might be helpful when they get on post to have some idea of what is happening now.

Q: I would have thought in a place like El Salvador that they would welcome companionship and welcome a feeling of belonging. Because that must be a very...

PICKERING: I think in El Salvador when we were there, with the intense political activities that were going on, the first democratic election in many years and so forth the officers truly were working long and late hours and I think they felt going to a party, even though it might be for a senior Senator of a major Committee or the Army Chief of Staff, someone like that, was just to them a burden. I understood that. What they didn't realize was that my husband, all the other senior officers were working just as har(she laughs) as they were. It wasn't that we were demanding any more of them than of us, and we always felt this was a wonderful opportunity for the junior officer, as we felt when we were junior officers, "Gosh, you might get to meet that Senator. You might get to talk to him, and he might ask your opinion, and you might meet up with him later and he might remember you."

Now, maybe we were more street smart, or politically smart, in making sure, when we got the opportunity to meet American as well as the foreign guests at these situations, to take advantage of it. I'm not sure that a lot of them understood that at all. There seems to be maybe again it's a generational thing of course, maybe the types of people entering our Service are different; I can't comment on that. I just observed a difference, a great difference when we started going overseas in the 80s than even in the 70s after the changes of the '72 Directive in the way that more officerand I don't mean junior, I don't mean even the very entering first tour, I mean all the way up to Counselor level seemed to be behaving quite differently toward the events in which I was involved, i.e., representational events, major visits, events, in their wanting to participate in anything

in the cultural sphere that we were trying to do if we had a cultural event at the mission. Of course, USIS is obviously involved but we always thought other people in our mission should have that opportunity to meet a different group of people in the country where they were living.

Sometimes major artists, writers, people in the cultural level are also very influential in political affairs as well, e.g., in Latin America some of the major political affairs there are the authors, writers, musicians. I'm not sure that [our officers] understood that either, as part of the job.

Q: How much freedom did the spouses have in the local community in El Salvador when you were there? That this many children were going in buses?

PICKERING: When we went to El Salvador in 1983, dependents were just being allowed back. They had been evacuated and had been a non-dependent post for at least one and a halyears, so I was very lucky it wasn't because we were going back, it had been changed and so...

Q: Did you follow Bob after [the evacuation]?

PICKERING: No, we followed Dean Hinton, who was by the way a widower when he went and in the last few months married a Salvadoran young woman. Dean had been there two years before us. So the situation was becoming much more normal, dependents were back, and it was the first time I was ever in an embassy, this is an interesting situation to describe, it was the first time I'd ever been in a mission or an embassy where the dependents had been evacuated and this was the return.

I found that in the two years previous to us, with no dependents at the post, it was quite a different post. The officers were there then worked together, worked very hard 12 to 15 hours a day. Then they would all go out together to eat. They lived together in houses for safety. There would be three or four people in a house; and so forth.

When the dependents started coming back, people began going into individual households. Men in particular whose wives and families had come, because most of the women who were there were single, would go home to their wives and families after whatever work hour and there was quite a morale problem for the single officers, both men and women, because suddenly their whole support group was gone. The consequence was there was great resentment against the dependents. It wasn't our fault, and rationally everybody would realize that.

We found the Administration section, the GSO's, resentful because there was a lot more work when suddenly everybody was going into houses. Suddenly the wives were asking to have some kind of curtains put up in the windows. (laughing) I mean, that sort of thing. The wives ran up against something of a stone wall in the Administrative Section because they weren't, simply, prepared for this. I found a real role in my gong to the Administrative officer, working with them. I always have seen my role as speaking up for the dependent community, and in that case I really had to be in there a lot and to try to be helpful, and explain, and get over this transition going to a normal post situation.

So the wives often were very discouraged. And I thought they were very courageous, because there was still a lot of activity going on. Not directed specifically against embassy personnel at that time but there was an enormous amount of security and it's very stressful to live with the type of security we had, because it meant at any moment something could happen when your husband was out on his job. I think we had a very courageous group of women. We had an American Women's Club, not an embassy group but a women's club which included American wives of Salvadorans, which was very good, because these women married to Salvadorans had been there through all the troubles, were very supportive, knew a lot about El Salvador, which was helpful to these wives.

And we developed a real esprit de corps, which you often do in these maximum hardship places. You must. You either do or you've got major problems where dependents leave and so forth. We were able to do that transition, but it was very difficult and I didn't realize

what it means when a post has been without dependents: it's a very different kind of atmosphere.

You asked how the wives adjusted. Sometimes I feel, in a situation like that, the wives were so happy to get back with their husbands and bring their families together and the school was running. The American schoolteachers were very courageous, too, to go back and be in that school. But sometimes it's easier when you have that kind of hardship and esprit than in some places that seem a little more comfortable. I've seen an embassy in another place have worse morale, much worse morale; much more difficult to pick it up. It's an interesting phenomenon that any of us who've been in the Foreign Service a long time know that hardship posts can be very supportive, you make friends that are friends forever. And (laughing) that's one of the great joys of foreign service career, because you do have that kind of support group not only when you're on post but when you're in Washington and when you retire. It's one of the great pluses.

Q: Tell me about being out in the desert.

PICKERING: Let me talk about our travels, because it's been one thing that my husband and I have found to be our own- (end of tape)

That's the part of thForeign Service I relate to. I think travel is one of the things many people join the Foreign Service as their (laughing) purpose. Certainly for my husband and myself. But we also found, from early days on, that it was also something we needed for our own personal morale. I mentioned earlier how lonely it can be for a senior spouse, and I think it's also very lonely for any senior official; and to keep their mental health, I think anybody needs to find either an avocation or an interest outside the specific work they're doing.In our case, and in many people's case, overseas is TRAVEL, and learning other cultures. So we've always done a great deal of travel. My husband particularly enjoys traveling by land, he feels he doesn't really know the country unless he's on wheels

where he can stop and go where he wishes rather than being confined to public or air transportation.

I think our particular travel started in the Middle East, because when we were in Jordan we were able to travel outside Jordan into desert areas using four wheel drive, which was the greatest thrill for my husband, and I also enjoyed traveling and camping in that way. We started the first year in Jordan with a major trip to “the Gulf,” as everybody now knows the Persian Gulf, and the purpose of that trip was to go to Oman. We had lived in Zanzibar, and the Sultan of Zanzibar had been from Oman, in fact Zanzibar was always very closely linked with Oman.

In Zanzibar there were many part Arab people. The culture was part Arab, and everybody talked about Muscat and Oman. So our purpose was to get to Oman, which meant driving through Saudi Arabia. We went to Qatar, we went across a little part of the Empty Quarte[Rub el Khali] of the great Arabian desert, went through the Emirate, and finally reached Oman. We drove to Muscat and when we got there and were driving through the city to stay with our ambassador, who lived in a traditional, old house, we were so thrilled because we kept saying, “It looks just like Zanzibar!” Only, it was really au contraire.

We saw, of course, dhows, the Arabian vessels that used to go on the monsoon back and forth from the Arabian Gulf country to East Africa or on into India and back. We returned from Oman of course driving back through some of the same route but on the way back we went to Kuwait, flew to Bahrain because there was no bridge then, back to Kuwait, and drove from Kuwait along the famous pipeline road back to Jordan.

I mention the famous pipeline road because that's the road that we've all seen, in photographs recently during the Persian Gulf war, that was used extensively by the UN's military forces and of course by many people fleeing to Jordan. In New York, everyone at the UN was amazed because my husband knew every area, he knew the routes, he knew

the roads. So you never know when these travels are als(she laughs) going to become politically important.

Q: That was quite a trip. How long did it take?

PICKERING: Two and a half weeks. We did a lot of camping, and we organized ourselves with two vehicles with a group of people from our mission, including our son, who came out from college. We learned a great deal about desert driving, resources that we could use. I saved the day on a later trip, because the next year we took an extensive trip at the same time of year, between November and December, about two and a half weeks, to Yemen.

We drove from Jordan through Saudi Arabia into a very difficult sand area between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, in which we had to hire a guide from the local sheikh, and the guide went with his Russian weapon, a Kalashnikov, and he was like a bandit of the 19th century, who led us through this sand area intoYemen, which is a different world from the rest of the Gulf. We drove to Sanaa, on to the coast of Mocha, where coffee was originally grown, hence the origin of the word. As we were returning along the coast of the Red Sea gulf, we had enormous problems with our vehicle, a Chevrolet four wheel drive carryall that most of our embassy people used as their major vehicle, which I used on official trips for my husband within the area of his concern, so we were able to use embassy vehicles.

We always took two vehicles. There was usually the military attach# or someone else from the mission with us. We were beginning to have major problems with this particular vehicle. As we were on the coast, seemingly hundreds of miles from anywhere, we hit a rock in the road and punctured the fuel line. We envisioned being stuck for days and were trying to repair the thing. My husband always made sure somebody with us was a very good mechanic and we always carried spare parts and did a lot of the work ourselves. We just needed something to fix this hole. We had no special part with us but I always carry a lot of chewing gum, because I find in the desert you get very dry and thirsty and

sometimes drinking soft drinks doesn't help but chewing gum does. I had packed some, and we decided that would be one of the best things to patch this vehicle. So six of us sat in the car chewing gum until we had an enormous wad of gum, which actually we used to pack the hole in the gas tank. We managed to make it up a great escarpment. There are very high mountains in Yemen, something like 7,000 feet altitude, that one must cross to get back onto the plateau of Saudi Arabia to return to Jordan. So we were going from sea level up over this 7,000 feet, and we finally arrived in a town in Saudi Arabia where we knew we could get the fuel line welded. As we were driving down the main street, dirty, covered with dust, looking like, well, certainly not from an embassy, a huge Cadillac pulled up beside us, in the back seat of which sat an emir, in white robes, absolutely immaculate; with his driver. He pulled up, because of course we had a foreign license plate and were looking for a repair shop, to ask what could he do for us.

When my husband stepped out and identified himself as the ambassador from Jordan, lookin(she laughs) like a hippy from who knows where, the Emir looked rather intently at us, but we had our passports and he immediately said that his chauffeur-secretary would direct us to the place where our car could be repaired. And then he sped off. Indeed, they were very helpful to us and we did reach Jordan safely.

That was our second major trip in the Middle East, but we did learn how to drive, how to prepare for that kind of traveling. So in 1981 when we went to Nigeria, my husband said from the moment we arrived we must cross the Sahara. I was quite game for that. We started to prepare almost from the day of our arrival, which was very fortunate because in less than two years we left Nigeria to be posted immediately to El Salvador much to our amazement, we didn't even have quite two years in Nigeria. But we started to plan this major trip across the Sahara.And there were quite a number of people in Nigeria then who were interested in the same kind of a trip. We started with the British World Bank representative and his wife, who were our mainstays, the four of us were the nucleus of our group. We began the planning. A year and a half later, in January 1983, we took our trip to the Sahara. Again we had, two vehicles and we had prepared for desert travel. One

of the ways my husband prepared everybody who might be expected to drive was to take them out onto the sand of the Gulf of Benin, our sea in Lagos, and make them drive up and down in all this sand, and if we got stuck, how to get out by using sand ladders. We prepared in many ways. We got navigational equipment, and a little water purification machine from Switzerland. Every time someone went to England or back to the U.S. we bought compasses and information, because it was a very serious matter, we felt, and it was, to cross the Sahara. We started from Lagos and took 26 days driving from there to Algiers and back.

Q: And back!

PICKERING: Well, that's a usual question! Because when we reached Algiers, everybody said, “How are you getting back?” And we said, “We're driving back.” Because we had the vehicles, one of which was the embassy's, one the Lagos Military Attach#'s, we had to return the vehicles. And we took two different routes anyway, so we saw more of the desert in any case. Of course, 900 miles of the total, I believe it was 1,700 miles altogether, was in Nigeria itself. To go from Lagos to northern Nigeria is a long trip in one day, certainly.

We were well prepared and we had no trouble, but at various points when we saw other people who were stranded, we realized that perhaps crossing by camel was safer than crossing by automobile. Because if anything happens to your vehicle, you are in serious trouble. We had spare parts. We had everything imaginable and had to have repairs done on the way. But I think that's what happens to people now. In the Sahara, if your vehicle breaks down, you're in trouble, but camels usually don't break down.

It was a very thrilling trip. We took along with us, besides our British colleagues and some people from our mission, the wife of the chief justice of Nigeria, who happened to be British-born, her husband was, of course, Nigerian, as were her children. She was a woman in her mid-60s, who heard about this trip and asked if she might come along. We

were very surprised, although we knew her quite well, that she wanted to come. And then we got a bit nervous about taking the wife of the chief justice of Nigeria along in case an accident or something like that did happen, (laughing) it might cause a diplomatic incident. But she was determined to go and we were delighted to have her. So we had a very international group of people.

We divided all the work so that each person had a specific task. My husband was the leader of the expedition and he drove all the way up and back. Our British colleague was the navigator, who kept meticulous records of our trip and kept us on course the whole way. I was the commissariat, I guess you would call iI had bought all the food and organized the meals, because we camped a great deal of the time in the desert, and packed it so that each night we knew which dinner was in which box, which breakfast, which lunch, so that we didn't have to totally unpack the car.

My husband's secretary went along, by the way, and she kept file cards of where everything was packed in the vehicles so we didn't waste time packing and unpacking unnecessarily. I did not do all the cooking, however; we shared that, and for every night we had a duty roster of who cooked, who washed up, who worked on the cars, and so on. We were really super-prepared. I kept a journal and when I came back also wrote up the trip journal, which is great fun for us to look at. We all took slides and when we returned shared in having copies made.

Our British colleague's wife and I then went on a lecture tour when we got back to Lagos, because everyone in Lagos was agog over this trip. They weren't sure they'd ever see us again when we left and they were very surprised to see us when we came back 26 days later, in great shape! So, every group from the Chamber of Commerce to the international women's clubs to our own embassy, wanted to hear the tale of this trip. We did a very good job, we thought. We organized our slides, we displayed the artifacts we had collected along the way, things from Niger, some from Algeria, including some stone microliths we found at a dry lakebed. Our Near East archeological experience had taught us to

recognize things like that, stones and so forth, in the desert. So we did a whole “road show,” as we called it, when we returned. And that was lots of fun.

In El Salvador we weren't able to do that kind of traveling or camping, of course, although we did visit all of the countries in Central America. Specifically, we went to Nicaragua. My husband felt that to return from El Salvador after having been to Nicaragua at that time would be valuable, which we did.

In Israel, we were able to pursue our archeological interests again by visiting major archeological sites. And we took three major trips to Egypt every year because that was the only country accessible by land from Israel; unlike Jordan, where we were able also to visit Turkey and other places. I have an interesting story to relate about our last trip to Egypt. The first time we went there from Israel, we visited Alexandria and some Coptic sites. Coptic monasteries still exist in Egypt. The second year we went to the Sinai, which had returned to Egypt in 1978, and spent four days camping there; not only the St. Catherine Monastery but also for ten days we explored some ancient Egyptian turquoise mines that are very well-known archeologically.

But for our final trip, during our third year, we decided we would like to visit the oases in the western desert of Egypt, because we loved desert traveling. We had to get out our camping equipment and get it back into action again. We started off by driving to Alexandria, then along the coast, visiting El Alamein and some World War II battle sites, and to the famous oasis of Siwa, where Alexander the Great had stopped on his way to the Middle East and consulted the oracle about his future; it is said that he was made a god at Siwa at that time and his fame was predicted. So we went to the oracle at Siwa. We didn't get a message from the oracle, but we should have known, because something very important happened at the end of the trip.

From Siwa we went back to the Fayum, a very particular part of the Nile Valley near Cairo, and drove to the western oases. One night while we camped in the western desert, a

few days into it after having visited two oases and several early pyramids, suddenly the Egyptian police who I shouldn't say they'd been escorting us, because we didn't want their escort, my husband had good maps and we knew where we wanted to go, but they had insisted on wanting to accompany us. They kept rather distant, and they didn't understand why we wanted to camp out, though we found it very glorious. They would leave us at night, and we kept telling them please not to come early in the morning, we'd get up fairly early but we wanted to do so alone.

Suddenly, at 7 a.m., while we were still in our sleeping bags, a policeman came, and my husband said, “Oh, no, no, go away “ but he said, “No, no, Sir, you are wanted from the embassy in Cairo. You must call them.” This was just after Thanksgiving, 1988.” So we got ourselves up and asked where was the nearest telephone. That is a very important question in Egypt, because telephoning takes a long time. We went to the next large town. The only place to make a call was at the PTT, the post office, so the policeman led my husband there. The phone was not working. They then went to the train station, found a phone, my husband finally got through to the embassy in Cairo, and was told there was a call for him from the Vice President's office, Vice President Bush having just been elected President.

Unfortunately, because by now it was in the middle of the night in Washington, they decided to make a date for 5 p.m. from the place where we planned to spend the night, farther up on the Nile, not as far south as Luxor. We drove off, with the embassy waiting to make the call for us. We spent the entire day being unable to tell our friends traveling with us what it was about, and indeed we did not know. So we spent the entire day wondering what was supposed to be our fatwe knew we were due to leave Israel very soon but had no idea where we might be going.We reached the hotel where we would stay, a former Russian-built hotel, put up for an aluminum factory in the area, a gigantic white elephant of a hotel. We were the only people staying there but that's where we had booked in and where we were to make the telephone call. We checked in, and at 5 o'clock my husband picked up the phone in our room only to find it didn't work. Then he discovered it wasn't

connected into the wall! (hearty laughter)So he raced down to the front desk. The only phone in the hotel was at the front desk, surrounded by all those receptiopeople, the security people, everybody waiting to hear this phone call.

They got through to Cairo, they got through to Washington, the Vice President gets on the line and says, “Hello, Tom,” and Tom says, “Hello, Sir “ and the line went dead. Totally dead, which is not unusual for Egypt. So the process starts again and takes about ten minutes to get through. The conversation starts again. “Hello, Tom” “Hello, Sir” and the Vice President says, “Tom, I have an important job I would like you to do” and the phone went dead again!I was so happy I was sitting upstairs in the room or I think I would have dropped dead.

Finally, on the third try the phone call gets through and as it begins, the VP's secretary says to my husband, “Oh, by the way, is this a secure line?” (she breaks up, laughing) And my husband said, “Of course not. I'm in a hotel. Oh, yes, it's secure except for everyone who's listening on the line between here and Cairo and Cairo and Washington.” So at this point the Vice President said, “Better make this very fast: I would like you to go to New York as our representative to the United Nations.” And my husband said “yes” before the phone would go dead again. When we got back to Cairo, my husband said, we would call again, of course.

So he came upstairs to tell me what the call had been about, which had taken at least half an hour and I was really beside myself; and he told me about the job at the UN, which I was very thrilled about. But about two hours lateby now it was late at night, we'd gone to bed, and I couldn't sleep. I finally said to him, “Oh! but that means we have to live in New York!” which I was not happy about.(laughter)

So that was the last of our adventures traveling in the desert. I think we should have known when we went to the oracle at Siwa that something was going to happen.

Q: That's a lovely story, it really is.

PICKERING: I'd like to say one more thing about travel that came to me that I'd thought about earlier. It's a question that people always ask us, as they ask anybody in the Foreign Service: “What is your favorite post?” At first I had great difficulty answering that question because in most cases I've enjoyed every post we've ever been, for special reasons. I've finally come upon an answer that I'm comfortable with.

I always say there are two ways to answer it: one of the first is, “it depends on one's age, whether or not you have a family, where you are in your career.”

Q: Absolutely.

PICKERING:And I always preface that by saying that our first post, besides Geneva, was on this wonderful island of Zanzibar, with two rather small children not so small that I had to worry much about their health, as one would with babies, but not old enough that we had to worry too much about school; and we lived a wonderful life with them at that age, because we could be in the water all the time, we had a boat, we had a totally outdoor life which was wonderful for them and wonderful for us at that age, with that age children.

If somebody asked me to go to Zanzibar today, although the U.S. no longer even has a post there, it would be very different, it would be very confining. It would have no intellectual challenge in every way and it would be very devastating. Later on, beginning in 1981 when for various reasons we'd only be in a post a very short time and suddenly be called off to another place, if we had had children with us of school age or they were in college, that's quite different; where we would have had to make transitions from school to school. Again, I think it would have been equally devastating if we had not been free. So, I really believe that part of perhaps you could say “luck in the Foreign Service,” part just your own choices that you make in the best possible way, lead you to sometimes be in places that are difficult for you because of these considerations.

But we have been fortunate. We have been in places where it suited the age of our children, our own age, our own interests of being able to travel the way we like to travel. For instance, in New York the last few years, we've been very confined because we haven't been able to do that. That's been a hardship for us personally for our own morale and mental health. But I think all those things must be kept in mind when you say what was your favorite post.

I want to add to that the other thing that I've found is central that, again, I learned by accident but was able to build on. And that is that you must personally find something that is very satisfying to you to do. For me, it's been finding something different that I would never have thought about doing if I'd stayed in the States and pursued a onetime career, one thing.

For example, in Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam, I developed a love of going for seashelling, something that everybody does there, but I love to swim, I love to be out in the water, and this gave me a challenge to finseashells, to learn to catalogue them, to learn a lot about that whole aspect of South Pacific life that I truly enjoyed.

In the Middle East, as I've mentioned, we did archeology and that was a great love for my husband and me because we had been history majors, we could discover the roots of our own civilization. I was able to take two courses, one at the American Center of Oriental Research on just the history of the ancient world, another on pottery identification, because we did a lot of traveling and going to sites where pottery was available and I felt a great curiosity to learn what that was about. So I had that sort of intellectual stimulus, as well as combining it with being able to explore and see parts of the country.

So every place that we have been I've tried to find some way that I, outside of the mission but related to the country in which I was staying, could find an interest that actually at dinner parties you could talk to people about. And I've found a very great personal

satisfaction in that everywhere. There isn't a country in the world where a person can't find something.

Q: Well, and your whole circle of friends are flattered when you show an intense interest like that, too. It helps.

PICKERING: It's true here, too. Often we've found that we saw far more of the country and knew far more of the country than the people who live there. That of course happens in Washington, too. That was really rather fun, and in many places we found people from the host country who also enjoyed doing things too. In Israel we often went with Israeli friends who wanted to show us particular archeological sites that they were fond of. They're all intensely interested in biblical archeology, and so we would spend a day together, with a picnic, and that's a wonderful way to meet people from the country in which you live. Again, aside from politics or anything else you might be involved with. That is, I think, the secret of your own good morale in a country.

The other part of that question which raises another issue that I've learned in my own experience is that, for me, what makes my life in a country outside the U.S. the most interesting is getting to know the people of the country. You can have the plushest embassy in the world, the best housing in the world, you can have every facility in a modern sense, but if you are not able to get to know the people of the country for whatever reason, if you don't develop relationships with the people of the country, your experience there will not be a positive one.

I mention only one case: our first overseas post was Geneva, and when people ask, “What was your favorite post?” and you don't mention Geneva, because to most Americans that seems apt to be, by nature, the “best” post, wonderful scenery, every facility you could want, Western in every way you could wish for and I have to tell you it was not my favorite post in any way. Because the Genevois were not easy to get to know. They were not particularly friendly especially to people. The UN mission, and in our whole two years there

we only knew one family. They were from Zurich, and they told us that they were just as much #trangers (foreigners) in Geneva as we were. We got to know them through our children at school, and we became friends.

But when I look at Geneva as a Foreign Service experience, it in no way compares to my life in Zanzibar or the Middle East or Lagos, which were very hardship posts in many, many ways. And I remember in Zanzibar, where we were very isolated much more so from the community than even in Geneva because it was during Cold War days and things were divided and we were not popular as being the American consulate or American embassy. But I remember [I was] invited at some time to a small women's group which was considered totally nonpolitical, and I went to that grouit was sort of a mother's union kind of thing in the English sense. And these women, even though we were in tropical Africa wanted to learn to knit, because they still put wool caps and coats on their children in the cooler season (That's about 70 degrees instead of 90.), but never mind, they still did that, and they wore wool caps.

They wanted to learn how to knit. I'm not a very good handicraft person but I did know how to knit. So I volunteered to show them. Two or three times a week I would go down and do basic knitting lessons, on basic needles, with whatever yarns we could find in the markets. I got friends to send me patterns of bootees and such. We managed to produce some sometimes strange looking article(she laughs) but they were proud of it.

I don't think anything has touched me more in my whole life. I really get teary when I remember it. As we were leaving Zanzibar, again, in a ver(she gropes for words) I should say environment that was almost hostile to us as Americans, not to us as people but as AmericanAnd we went out to the airport with our things and those ladies from that group, five of them, came out to say goodbye to me and waved goodbye. I really get overcome when I think about it. I think that was probably more important than larger groups I've dealt with ever since.

Q: That leads to my next question. When we think of "foreign relations" and "foreign affairs," if the general public thinks of them at all, I think they think of it as what our husbands are doing. How would you define our contribution to foreign affairs? Because we do make a contribution. It's very hard to define, maybe, because I've always felt that it was hard to measure what USIS does in a country because you're people to people, it's not a written formal document, it's not a formal relationship betwee(laughing) can you say in 25 words or less, Alice?

PICKERING: I can do it because you've hit a chord with me. Because I started out as an information services officer, that's where I had my one-year experience of my own as a Foreign Service officer. Consequently I deeply believe in the role of cultural affairs within the Foreign Service context. And I find that the role of the spouse in the Foreign Service, outside of USIS, often functions in the same way because it is the people-to-people context.

And I remember in the 1950s when we were starting out, President Eisenhower had this program called "People to People."It sounds very simplistic but over the years I've seen what this people-to-people context can do in your relationships in a significant way. I have met people in every country where I've been who, for example, have visited the U.S. on USIS's Special Visitor program. Now, my contribution to that now in a different context is that often USIS will come to the ambassador and his wife and say, "Who are the people you're meeting in this society where you're living that we should send from sectors of life in that country?" And I find I can often come up with women I've known in organizations with which our American Women's Club has worked, whom I can identify as people who would benefit the most from this experience of coming to the U.S. and seeing other groups in our country that can be beneficial to that country to take back, and that these are the type of people who will become leaders in their country in the future.

Not only women but in any of the sectors in which I've always become involved again, fairly much cultural. And I mean cultural in a broad spectrum university as well as the

arts, because I've often spent time at the universities either studying or going to lecture groups or trying to pursue some of those kinds of interests outside of just the “pure arts.” And I feel that is the way that an embassy functions best: when you are [in] contact with all segments of the society in the country in which you live and can make significant contributions to their knowledge about our own country, which is certainly one of the roles that we have to play, and being able to identify and sense. Take the educational standpoint, for example.

I feel that you do not understand how a country functions until you understand how their educational system works. What do they do in their country for the education of their own people? If you understand that you have a greater sense of how the current leaders of that country have developed, where they're coming from. So if you see the broad range, and you understand the broad range in the country in which you're living, I simply feel that the embassies have better resources when they pursue policy interests in that country. How to approach it, how to deal with it, how to give our views to these people in an acceptable way.

I know my husband believes in this approach and we've always done it together, because he knows my background in USIS so we've always encouraged things to be done at our house that will be in the cultural context as well as the political context. And I also find that as a senior wife, I spend hours going to official functions — teas, dinners, concerts in the country wherever you are. You're constantly meeting people — not necessarily just the spouses of the leaders, you're meeting people all over. I always go with my husband to the universities when he makes calls, and I meet, as well as he does, people.

I find if you talk to them and you wish to learn and you're also feeding in your own experiences as an American or what the U.S. possibly can do in relations to the country's organizations, I can't help but believe that it fills some role in our overall relationship with that country. And this is what we're always trying to do one of the mandates: You build better relationships between your country and whatever country you're serving in.

That's the approach I've tried to follow all these years. And what you find, of course, is that you always get more out of it than you put in and I learned as much as I could. I think that challenge that is there is something that keeps me alive and happy. I think we agree on these things.

So I want to be positive, I don't want to be negative on what I said earlier. I think there are so many positive things about the Service, and the way you approach it and what you can put into it.

Q: I think that rounds out very nicely your first interview, don't you?

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BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Spouse: Thomas R. PickeringSpouse's position: Political Officer, Consul, DCM, Ambassador, Assistant Secretary of State, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Spouse entered Service: July 1959 You entered Service: September 1954Left Service: December 1955 (marriage; USIS, The Hague, Netherlands)

Status: Ambassador's spouse

Posts:

September 1954 - December, 1955 - The Hague, The Netherlands (This was my own assignment as a FS Officer with U.S. Information Agency, resigned upon marriage)

With Spouse: 1959-1962Washington, DC, Bureau of Intelligence & Research 1962-1964Geneva, Switzerland, U.S. Mission to the United Nations at the 19-Nation Disarmament Conference 1964-1965Washington, DC, Language Training (Swahili)

1965-1967Zanzibar, Tanzania, U.S. Consulate (U.S. Consul) 1967-1969Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, U.S. Embassy (DCM) 1969-1973Washington, DC, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (Deputy Director) 1973-1974Washington, DC (Executive Secretary of the Department) 1974-1978Amman, Jordan, U.S. Embassy (U.S. Ambassador) 1978-1981Washington, DC, Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans, Environment, Scientific & Technical Affairs 1981-1983Lagos, Nigeria, U.S. Embassy (Ambassador) 1983-1985San Salvador, El Salvador, U.S. Embassy (Ambassador) 1985-1989Tel Aviv, Israel, U.S. Embassy (Ambassador) 1989-presNew York, New York, U.S. Mission to the United Nations, U.S. Permanent Representative

Place/Date of birth: Sharon, Pennsylvania; June 15, 1931

Maiden name: Stover

Parents:

George C. Stover, teacher

Alice G. Stover, teacher

Schools:

Sharon High School; Swarthmore, BA

Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, MA

Catholic University, MSLS (Library Science)

Profession:

Foreign Service officer, 1 year

Librarian

Date/Place of marriage: November 24, 1955; The Hague, Netherlands

Children:

Timothy R. Pickering, March 19, 1957

Margaret S. Pickering, December 28, 1959

Volunteer and Paid Positions held: At Post (No Paid Positions): Amman, JordanPresident, American Women's Association; Board of Trustees, American Center for Oriental Research (Amman, Jordan) Lagos, NigeriaPresident, American Women's Association San Salvador, El SalvadorPresident, American Women's Association Tel Aviv, IsraelPresident, American Women's Association Tel Aviv, IsraelProgram Chair, International Women's Club - led seminar on women's issues New York, New YorkPresident, UN Heads of Mission Wives' Group; Board of Governors; Foreign Policy Association Off-the-Record Luncheons; Board of Metropolitan Committee for UNICEF;

In Washington:Regional Reference Librarian, Sherwood Regional Library, Fairfax County, VA

Honors:

BA, magma cum laude

Phi Beta Kappa

Beta Phi Mu (Librarian Honor Society)

End of interview